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Islamophobia in Myanmar: the Rohingya genocide and the 'war on terror'

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Abstract: This article analyses the Rohingya genocide of August 2017. The accusation of genocide has been denied by the state of Myanmar, but what is demonstrated here is how the phenomenon of Islamophobia – anti-Muslim racism – informed, sanctioned and culminated in a genocide whose consequences are ongoing. Islamophobia has generally been understood to relate to the 'othering' of Muslims in settler societies and the nations of the global North, as documented by critical race, postcolonial and feminist scholars, with much of the current discourse on it structured around the 'war on terror'. But increasingly, it has also come to encompass systemic racism and anti-Muslim violence in the global South, with, in Myanmar, the 'war on terror' used to sanitise more recent violence against the Rohingya. This article examines both structural Islamophobia, and the Islamophobia of private actors in Myanmar, in particular the powerful Buddhist extremist movement. It demonstrates that the co-dependent relationship between structural and private Islamophobia since military rule in Myanmar, in the absence of a strong and unified resistance, contributed to the genocide. Moreover, the troubling logic used to defend state-sponsored violence and killing in Myanmar

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bears a number of similarities to Islamophobic trajectories in other spaces of the global South in the context of the 'war on terror'.

Keywords: anti-Muslim racism, critical race theory, dialectical Islamophobia, global South, Rohingya genocide, 'war on terror'

Introduction

While the world's attention has been drawn, sporadically, to the sustained and brutal assaults carried on by the Myanmar military in conjunction with Buddhist extremist groups against the Rohingya, culminating in the August 2017 genocide, little attention has been paid to its genesis in Islamophobia – I use the term interchangeably with anti-Muslim racism – or the influence on it of the 'war on terror'. Islamophobia has been frequently examined within settler societies, such as the US, Canada and Australia, as well as in a number of European nations, including the UK, France, Germany and the Netherlands, amongst others. Islamophobia is not a recent phenomenon that came about as a consequence of the 'war on terror'. Rather, it has an enduring legacy as one of the many iterations of racism that scholars have traced back to the earliest encounters between Muslim and non-Muslim cultures.[1] Though the term Islamophobia is synonymous with Muslim experiences in the global North, increasingly, in the context of the 'war on terror', the term is gaining expediency in other spaces where Muslims occupy a minority status such as Brazil, Argentina, the Philippines, India, China and other nations across the global South.[2] In Myanmar, the phenomenon of Islamophobia culminated in the Rohingya genocide of August 2017.[3]

The Rohingya are a predominantly Muslim minority group indigenous to a region on the western coast of Myanmar, historically referred to as Arakan and presently called Rakhine State.[4] The genocide was an organised campaign by the Myanmar military in conjunction with Buddhist extremist groups, which resulted in the death of approximately 24,000 Rohingya.[5] The Myanmar military along with Buddhist extremists engaged in a scorched earth policy, torching entire Rohingya villages, engaging in mass rapes of women and girls, and indiscriminately murdering civilians.[6] According to a survey by Médecins Sans Frontières, approximately 9,400 Rohingya were murdered in Rakhine State between 25 August and 24 September 2017, with at least 730 of the victims, children.[7] Rohingya men, women and children were targeted because they belonged to a Muslim minority ethnic group that differed from the Burman Buddhist majority.[8] Furthermore, thousands of Rohingya were traumatised through physical attacks, sexual violence and the destruction of their homes.[9] The term 'genocide' will be used throughout this examination when describing the violence that began in August 2017. This classification has been contested by the state of Myanmar; however, a number of nations, as well as UN officials, have acknowledged military actions against the Rohingya as genocide.

In September 2018, Canada recognised the crimes committed against the Rohingya at the hands of the Myanmar military as constituting genocide, and urged the United Nations (UN) Security Council to act.[10] A UN investigative report released in August 2018 stated that top military commanders in Myanmar should be investigated and prosecuted for the 'gravest' crimes against civilians under international law, including genocide.[11] In November 2019, The Gambia filed a lawsuit with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague, accusing Myanmar of genocide.[12] Subsequently, on 23 January 2020, a panel of seventeen judges at the ICJ unanimously ordered Myanmar to take all necessary measures to prevent genocide of the existing Rohingya in Myanmar, including the prevention of killing, causing serious bodily or mental harm to the Rohingya, as well as preserving evidence of possible genocide that has already occurred.[13]

What needs to be explored is the co-dependent relationship between state-organised forms of anti-Muslim racism, and Islamophobia at the hands of private actors since military rule in Myanmar from the 1960s to the present. The co-dependent relationship between private and structural Islamophobia in the absence of a robust and unified resistance facilitated a pathological trajectory, which resulted in the Rohingya genocide. Furthermore, geopolitical realities in the context of the 'war on terror' have sanitised state-sanctioned violence against the Rohingya in Myanmar. The wider insights provided by such an analysis are important, as the logic used to defend the violence bears similarities to Islamophobic trajectories in other spaces across the global South. Furthermore, this study builds on the emerging literature of the Rohingya genocide by examining it through an Islamophobia Studies lens.

Understanding Islamophobia and its significance in the 'war on terror'

According to Chris Allen, the earliest found usage of the term 'Islamophobia' can be traced back to France in 1925 by authors Etienne Dinet and Slima Ben Ibrahim who wrote about 'accès de délire Islamophobe' ('Islamophobic delirium'), referring to western perceptions of Muslims.[14] In another instance, Caroline Fourest and Fiammetta Venner claimed that the term was used during the Iranian revolution by religious conservatives to describe Muslim women who refused to wear the hijab.[15] However, neither of these instances describes how the term has come into usage in contemporary times. A broad understanding of Islamophobia that is helpful for understanding this phenomenon is as follows:

> Islamophobia is the modern progeny of Orientalism . . . a worldview that casts Islam as the civilizational antithesis of the West and that is built upon the core stereotypes and baseline distortions of Islam and Muslims embedded in . . . institutions and the popular imagination by Orientalist theory, narratives and law.[16]

The above definition is useful in that it acknowledges Islamophobia as a historical phenomenon predating the twenty-first century. It alludes to how Islamophobia

has been influenced over the centuries by strains of thought and ideologies that viewed Muslims and the Orient as 'other'. This definition also recognises the varying spheres in which Islamophobia exists, both structurally and through private actors, which reinforce explicit and implicit power relationships. Explicit forms of power manifest through political policies, legislation and inflammatory political rhetoric, while implicit power relations entail encounters with private citizens attempting to maintain cultural dominance over a threatening Muslim 'other'. However, this article will expound on this definition by viewing Islamophobia beyond a western context.

A number of academics and commentators have examined Islamophobia as a historical phenomenon. These works view anti-Muslim racism as a continuum through historical moments including the Crusades, European colonialism, the 1973 Oil Crisis, the Iranian Revolution, the Gulf War, as well as other instances in which there were conflicts and tensions between Muslim-majority nations and the West.[17] Such works provide a historical grounding to understand Islamophobia, but are framed overwhelmingly through a dichotomist relationship between the West and Islam. In the context of the 'war on terror', a broader metanarrative of Islamophobia has emerged, transcending global North and South barriers.[18] Since the onset of the 'war on terror', one of the more prominent allegorical figures that has emerged globally is that of the 'dangerous Muslim man'.[19] The dangerous Muslim man is an archetype of Muslim men who are framed as being a misogynistic threat, prone to engage in terrorism and violent extremist activities. As such, if the Muslim man is not already radicalised, his potential for becoming radicalised and violent perpetually exists. This has led to the justification of mass surveillance, targeted laws, and the proliferation of the countering, and preventing, violent extremism industry.[20] Such policies and legislation have disproportionately affected Muslim men across the global North and South over other religious and ethnic groups, under the guise of preserving national security.[21]

Beyond structural processes that have policed the dangerous Muslim man, private forms of Islamophobia also perpetuate the dangerous Muslim man myth. This is prevalent in media representations of Muslims in films about terrorism, media coverage of terrorist attacks and foiled plots, as well as news stories about Muslims entangled in domestic violence, which are framed as 'honor-based violence'.[22] The uniformity of legislation, state actions and messaging from private actors that continually reinforce the notion of Muslim men as dangerous, prone to violence, needing to be policed by the state, and threatening to non-Muslims and Muslims alike, creates an echo chamber. The underlying assumption is that certain forms of violence exist singularly as a consequence of the dangerous Muslim man. In this way, members of the majoritarian culture are exalted above these actions, tendencies and qualities.[23] Exceptions may exist, as exceptionalism is essential to the perpetuation of racism and racial supremacy.[24] That is to say that members of the non-Muslim majoritarian culture may engage in acts of terrorism, violent extremism, or possess 'radicalised' views. However, these are explained away as aberrations and anomalies. This line of thinking, referred to as

'exaltation',[25] serves to protect a pure and sanitised national imaginary by casting out undesirable qualities such as terrorism, radicalisation and particular forms of violence and abuse into an obscure realm of 'otherness'.[26] The union between the dangerous Muslim archetype and the notion of exaltation forms the basis for what I describe as '"war on terror" logic'. This paradoxical viewpoint imagines terrorism and other forms of political violence as existing through Muslim 'otherness', while it simultaneously sanitises blatant manifestations of them that emanate from within the nationalist space/subject on the grounds that they are necessary to police the dangerous Muslim. 'War on terror' logic has increasingly become normalised in present day public and political discourse surrounding Muslims, and was central to Aung San Suu Kyi and the state of Myanmar's justifications for the Rohingya genocide.

In addition to the 'dangerous Muslim man' archetype and the notion of 'exaltation', another critical paradigm in understanding global trends of Islamophobia in the context of the 'war on terror' is 'dialectical Islamophobia'.[27] As described above, Islamophobia, like other forms of racism, exists and is expressed structurally and through private actors. Khaled Beydoun describes another dimension of Islamophobia, which he refers to as 'dialectical Islamophobia'.[28] Dialectical Islamophobia describes the interrelationship between structural and private Islamophobia. According to Beydoun, dialectical Islamophobia is a process where 'structural Islamophobia, shapes, reshapes and endorses views or attitudes about Islam and Muslim subjects inside and outside America's borders'.[29] Through dialectical Islamophobia, popularised Islamophobic narratives are legitimised by state policies. Beydoun's discussion of dialectic Islamophobia predominantly describes a top-down relationship between structural and private Islamophobia. In other words, through power exercised by the state to police the Muslim subject, private actors are emboldened and signalled to take action. When the state designates the Muslim subject as a threatening force that needs policing through structural processes, particularly in relation to countering and preventing violent extremism, it prompts and stirs the suspicions of private citizens, giving them a pretext to act. This occurs through nativist street protest movements, hate crimes, racial violence, the vandalism of Muslim structures, as well as bias and discriminatory portrayals of Muslims in the media. Examining the dialectical aspect of Islamophobia in the context of Myanmar demonstrates that a symbiotic relationship between structural and private Islamophobia did and does exist. This co-dependent relationship between structural and private Islamophobia involved the state emboldening private actors of Islamophobia and stirring them into action. However, populist nativist groups in Myanmar, particularly Buddhist monks and groups from the Theravada Buddhist tradition, also empowered and legitimised the state, which ultimately contributed to a state-endorsed genocide.

This article adds to the literature on critical Islamophobia Studies scholarship by building on the dialectic component of Islamophobia. This will be accomplished by extending the top-down relationship established by Beydoun, to viewing dialectical Islamophobia as a co-dependent web of relations between structural

and private Islamophobia in the context of Myanmar. That is to say, Islamophobia in Myanmar – in the making since the beginning of military rule in 1962 – has been a top-down and bottom-up process, currently informed by a global narrative of Islam and Muslims constructed through the 'war on terror'.

Structural and private Islamophobia in Myanmar

The Rohingya genocide did not occur in a vacuum or without warning. Like all genocides, it was systematic, procedural and many years in the making. The roots of the tensions between Rohingya Muslims and the Burman Buddhist majority can be traced back to imperial rule over Burma.[30] These tensions were exacerbated during the period of military rule in the 1960s.

Historical backdrop of Burma prior to military rule

Prior to the colonial period, the Rohingya were one of many indigenous minorities in the Arakan region of Burma. It is unclear precisely when the Rohingya settled in Arakan. What can be said definitively about them is that census information obtained during the British colonial occupation of the region indicated that an indigenous Muslim group called 'Rooinga' were native to that land prior to the 1820s.[31] As such, there is strong evidence suggesting that the Rohingya have been indigenous to the Arakan region for centuries. Tensions between the Rohingya and the Burman Buddhist majority began to grow during the period of British colonial rule of Burma from 1824–1948. During this period, the colonisers gave preference with regards to social mobility and administration of the colony to Muslim minorities over the Buddhist majority.[32] Another source of tension occurred in the second world war, when Myanmar was invaded by the Japanese. The Burman Buddhist majority had aligned with the Japanese, while the Rohingya had stayed loyal to the British, which the Burman majority perceived as conflicting loyalties from the Rohingya. These relations were further strained when the Rohingya unsuccessfully petitioned for parts of Rakhine State to be annexed to East Pakistan during the 1947 partition between India and Pakistan.[33] In the 1947 Burmese Constitution, the Rohingya, along with other minority ethnic groups, were granted National Registration Certificates in the place of citizenship certificates. This gave the Rohingya full legal and voting rights and recognised them as one of the indigenous races of the Union of Burma.[34] Despite tensions between the Rohingya and the Burman Buddhist majority, the Rohingya were treated like most other minority groups in Burma, with the eventual possibility of naturalisation. This posture changed dramatically during military rule in Burma.

Structural Islamophobia in Myanmar in the aftermath of military rule

In 1962, Burma came under the military rule of Ne Win in a coup d'état. The Rohingya were steadily losing their rights under Ne Win's ultra-nationalist military regime. The regime felt it necessary to find internal enemies to detract from

economic crises that embroiled the nation. This was accomplished by targeting the Rohingya 'other', as well as by promoting nativism through a Burman Buddhist national identity. The reason that the Rohingya were targeted by the state was because they were an easy and safe target.[35] They were an easy target because they differed ethnically, religiously and linguistically from the Burman Buddhist majority. This was compounded by a mythology that was propagated through a military leadership that viewed the Rohingya as interlopers who had been supporting an independent Muslim state since the time of British rule over Burma.[36] Hence, a key component to the brutal military crackdown on the Rohingya were unfounded fears of the Islamisation of the Burman state. Islamisation is a conspiratorial view which asserts that Muslim populations are threatening to numerically and culturally submerge a nation.[37] Unfounded fears and paranoia over the Islamisation of non-Muslim majority lands has also been a common trope used to promote Islamophobic discourse and rhetoric in North American and European societies.[38] The Rohingya were a safe target because they were less militarised. In other words, there was minimal and passive resistance from the Rohingya to state oppression and discrimination as compared to other ethnic and religious groups in Rakhine State.[39] Among the few organisations that did resist were the Rohingya Patriotic Front founded in 1974 and its successor, the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) established 1982. The RSO's primary aim was to secure the citizenship and political rights of the Rohingya. To this end, they carried out attacks on police and military outposts in northern Rakhine throughout the 1980s and 1990s. However, the RSO had become largely non-operational by the late 1990s. More recently, another resistance group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), has engaged in similar tactics to the RSO by attacking police outposts. However, as Wade suggests, there was no 'evidence of a broad sympathy among Rohingya for armed warfare . . . The population was too vulnerable, and any mobilisation would invite the full wrath of the military, as well as local Rakhine.'[40] This was on full display when ARSA attacked police outposts in August 2017, which precipitated the Rohingya genocide.

The first major structural process instituted by the military government, which significantly curtailed the rights and freedoms of the Rohingya was the Emergency Immigration Act in 1974. This law introduced ethnicity-based identity cards which identified Burmese nationals. The Rohingya were issued Foreign Registration Cards, designating them non-nationals. Furthermore, Article 145 in the 1974 Constitution stated that 'All persons born of parents both of whom are nationals of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma are citizens of the Union.'[41] Article 145, along with the Emergency Immigration Act, made the Rohingya stateless. They were designated as foreigners in lands that they had been indigenous to for centuries. These severe citizenship laws sought to unify national identity along Burman Buddhist lines, solidifying the 'otherness' of the Muslim Rohingya population through structural processes. To consolidate these stringent citizenship laws, Ne Win instituted a pogrom in 1978 named Operation Nagamin (King Dragon). This pogrom entailed military and immigration

officials scrutinising those living in border regions of Myanmar to determine 'real' citizens and 'foreigners', with the aim of routing out the Rohingya.[42] At the commencement of this operation in March 1978, word began to spread that troops conducting this supposed census were raping and murdering Rohingya in the villages. The state's open targeting of the Rohingya through this pogrom eventually led to 200,000 Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh in 1978 as refugees. These massacres were repeated in 1991 through the State Law and Order Restoration Council, which was also checking the status of the Rohingya in the border regions. This led to another wave of 250,000 Rohingya refugees between 1991and 1992.[43] In both instances, the Bangladeshi government sent most of the fleeing Rohingya back to Myanmar. Other structural processes that targeted Rohingya Muslims during military rule in Myanmar were measures that severely limited social mobility.

By 1997, restrictions on movement had been implemented in Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State, and eventually made their way to other parts of Rakhine including Maungdaw and Buthidaung, all of which were townships with significant Rohingya populations. These restrictions on movement involved checkpoints along the borders of the townships. For Rohingya to cross over from one township to another required a permit fee of up to eight dollars. However, whether one held a permit or not, authorities had the right to turn away people seeking to enter a township as they pleased. Hence a bribe, referred to as 'tea money', would frequently have to accompany the permit.[44] The institution of 'tea money' placed an economic burden on the Rohingya that ultimately served to limit their freedom of movement between townships in Rakhine State. Consequently, the Rohingya were restricted to living in ghettos. Not only did these policies limit cultural and social exchange with the Burman majority, it also limited access to higher education, employment opportunities and healthcare.

There was a strategic neglect by the state in providing healthcare to regions of Rakhine in which Rohingya were a majority. A report by Human Rights Watch found that in the 2000s the townships of Maungdaw and Buthidaung, where Rohingya Muslims were the majority of the residents, there were only two doctors for a population of 158,000. This was in stark contrast to Sittwe with 681 doctors, where Buddhists outnumber Rohingya Muslims.[45] Subsequently, in Buthidaung, 224 out of 1,000 children were dying before they reached the age of five.[46] In addition to the state's neglect of healthcare access, it also took active measures to limit the natural growth of the Rohingya. In 2005, state authorities instituted reproductive restrictions in the northern townships of Maungdaw and Buthidaung.[47] Rohingya Muslims were subject to a two-child policy, which curtailed natural growth. The restrictions on reproductive rights along with the wilful neglect of healthcare access to Rohingya-dominated regions, which contributed to the deaths of nearly one out of every four Rohingya children under the age of five in Buthidaung, were indications of how the state took concrete steps to curb the population growth of the Rohingya. These policies were justified and sanitised through unwarranted fears of the impending Islamisation of the Burman

Buddhist majority nation. These measures were reaffirmed by the state after military rule in 2013. Government officials justified the law claiming that the two-child policy was aimed at addressing the rapid population growth among 'Bengali' communities in Myanmar.[48] The purposeful use of the term 'Bengali' to describe the Rohingya has been a consistent device used by the state to reinforce a national mythology of the Rohingya as a foreign contaminant. The Rohingya have been perpetually viewed as 'other' within this state-constructed narrative, which aimed to exalt belongingness to the nation along an exclusive Burman Buddhist identity.[49] Similar approaches have been employed by private actors, namely Buddhist extremist monks and organisations, which have contributed to the flourishing of private forms of Islamophobia in Myanmar.

Private Islamophobia in Myanmar in the aftermath of military rule

Buddhist monks have traditionally played an important role in populist mobilisation in Myanmar. Much of this mobilisation was to challenge and resist the corruption of military rule. Therefore, the religious elite were instrumental in the transition from military dictatorship to a democratic government.[50] It is important here to note that, despite the military regime's promotion of Burman Buddhist nationalism, Buddhist monks and extremist groups were distinct from the government and did not act at their behest. Buddhist groups regularly opposed military rule in Myanmar on grounds of corruption. Buddhist extremist groups and the military regime displayed a common hatred towards the Rohingya. As such, the government often turned a blind eye to their targeting of the Rohingya. However, these groups functioned independently of the government and have therefore been classified as private actors in this analysis. In addition to organising and mobilising against the military regime, Buddhist monks also made Buddhist supremacy a main tenet of their activism. Similar baseless fears over cultural erosion have become endemic in North American and European Islamophobic street protest movements;[51] private Islamophobia in Myanmar was formulated and articulated through a discourse of cultural preservation.

The Buddhist tradition most common in Myanmar is the Theravada tradition, which is also common in Thailand and Sri Lanka. This tradition differs significantly from Tibetan Buddhism with regards to pacifism and non-violence.[52] The Theravada tradition is characterised by ultra-nationalism and the linking of religion with state power.[53] As such, the state's acceptance of other religious traditions is viewed as an existential threat to both state and faith. Some strands of the Theravada tradition view non-Buddhists as lesser or sub-humans. Consequently, violence against other religious and ethnic communities is acceptable in the name of preserving Buddhism as a dominant state ideology.[54] The backdrop of private Islamophobia in Myanmar was framed around this type of religious zealotry, as a number of religious structures and institutions have been targeted by Buddhist extremist groups. The 969 Movement and the MaBaTha have been central in stirring religious rivalry and violence, as well as providing an ideological foundation for private Islamophobia in Myanmar.

The 969 Movement was an outgrowth of a 1988 Buddhist nationalist movement that sought to preserve Buddhist purity in Burma.[55] One of the prominent leaders of this movement was Ashin U Wirathu, who openly called for economic boycotts of Muslim-owned shops and advocated violence against Muslims of all ethnicities in Myanmar.[56] The 969 Movement has denounced the Union Solidarity and Development Party, the remnant of the military dictatorship, which retains a quarter of the parliamentary seats in the governmental structure of Myanmar, and the National League for Democracy, the current democratically elected government of Myanmar, as being insufficiently anti-Muslim to preserve Burman Buddhist purity in the nation.[57] Ironically, both of these political parties have done very little, if anything, to protect the Rohingya minority in Rakhine State. Through these state entities, numerous laws have been implemented which have aggressively stripped away the rights freedoms and protections of the Rohingya. Furthermore, under the leadership of these groups, state-controlled and private media have been given carte blanche to target, vilify and abuse the Rohingya in Rakhine.[58] The 969 Movement claims that it does not directly command its followers to commit acts of violence against Muslims in Myanmar. According to it, if such speech leads to violence, that is an unintended consequence. However, such violence, in 969's view, is acceptable if it preserves and promotes Burman Buddhist supremacy.[59] This twisted logic resonates with prominent western Islamophobes like Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer, who absolved themselves despite their works being quoted at length by, and serving as an inspiration to, Anders Breivik, the Norwegian far-right terrorist who murdered seventy-seven people in a bombing and shooting spree in Oslo and on Utøya Island in protest against the supposed Islamisation of Europe.[60] In both instances, Islamophobic rhetoric stirred and precipitated private actors into violent actions. The resulting violence may be an unintended consequence; however, there is an inability to condemn the hate speech or the acts of violence, as the goal of such violence aligns with the essence of the messages. Buddhist groups like the 969 Movement have had a strong populist appeal in Myanmar because they have been a source of resistance to the greed and corruption of the government under military dictatorship.[61] Furthermore, in the face of a crumbling infrastructure and economic crisis under the military regime, a number of these extremist Buddhist groups became major providers of basic education for Myanmar's poor.[62] The Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion, abbreviated as MaBaTha, has also had a major influence on the education system in Myanmar.

The core focus of the teachings of MaBaTha is one of preservation of the Buddhist faith from outside threats. MaBaTha has produced textbooks used in Sunday schools across Myanmar, which supplement state schooling. The key message of its textbooks is not of religious tolerance and the acceptance of other religious traditions. Rather, these texts assert that Islam threatens the preservation of Buddhism in the nation.[63] In addition to spreading Islamophobic messages through supplementary education in Myanmar, the MaBaTha has also been

at the forefront of campaigns to hinder the local Muslim economy. In conjunction with the 969 Movement, the MaBaTha has run a number of 'buy Buddhist' campaigns, effectively creating economic boycotts of Muslim-owned businesses. This has included moves to close Muslim-run slaughterhouses under the absurd pretence that Muslims will consume all of the cows and harm the nation's agricultural industry.[64] Actions such as these by private actors in Myanmar have crippled Muslim-owned businesses and created stumbling blocks for the Rohingya to observe religious ritual practices and consume religiously authorised meat. Furthermore, the hatred, paranoia and misinformation disseminated by these groups not only creates economic and social obstacles, but has also prompted private actors to engage in religious violence, attack religious structures and use sexual violence against the Rohingya.[65]

Through structural and private Islamophobia, various spheres of life have been made insupportable for the Rohingya. At the hands of the government, the Rohingya have been made stateless and been confined to ghettos, limiting their access to healthcare, education, housing, economic opportunities and social mobility. Furthermore, the state has actively taken measures to curtail the population growth of this community. These difficulties have been compounded by the Burman Buddhist religious elite which propagates Islamophobic messages to incite and stir private actors into violent actions against the Rohingya. Additionally, private Islamophobia has manifested itself in economic boycotts that have caused financial devastation and thrown up barriers to ritual practices. This symbiotic relationship between structural and private Islamophobia in Myanmar precipitated the Rohingya genocide of August 2017; the violence enacted against the Rohingya was sanitised through the discourse relating to the 'dangerous Muslim man' and reinforced by the posture of 'exaltation'; common tropes in the 'war on terror'.

Dialectical Islamophobia in Myanmar

In order to understand dialectical Islamophobia as a co-dependence between state Islamophobia and that of private actors, namely Buddhist extremist groups, it is necessary to understand Myanmar's government structure after military rule.

Myanmar's transition to democracy

There were a number of unsuccessful attempts to democratise Burma during military rule. The transition to a democratic government slowly took hold after Cyclone Nargis in 2008. Cyclone Nargis was a devastating natural disaster that destroyed 65 per cent of the country's rice fields, 95 per cent of buildings in the delta region, and left an estimated 138,000 dead.[66] The military government grossly mismanaged the disaster response, which led to further protests in the nation. To quell this unrest the military regime was forced to allow elections in

2010. Through a continual process of political parties boycotting rigged elections amid growing public discontent, a democratic government was finally able to come to power in 2015. The National League for Democracy's (NLD) victory in the 2015 election, led by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, signalled democratic progress and the potential for self-governance in the nation.

A key factor enabling Aung San Suu Kyi to win the election was her ability to gain support from various Buddhist groups. The utility of this relationship was mutually beneficial, as these groups consistently opposed the corruption of the military regime, while the alliance bolstered the NLD's support from the masses.[67] However, despite giving the appearance of a democratically elected government, the military had placed checks and balances to ensure significant control and dominance over the civilian administration of the nation.[68] The former military regime allowed for Myanmar to transition into a democracy by retaining 25 per cent of the parliament through the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).[69] As the military held key positions in the parliament, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD government were required to strike a balance between acquiescing to the demands of the military in administering the civilian population and pandering to the Buddhist extremist elites to maintain their base of popular support. In essence, the 'democratically' elected government was steeped in complex power dynamics, which required the NLD to submissively accept the brutality of the military and Buddhist extremists towards the Rohingya to maintain the semblance of a progressive democratically elected government. Through this multilayered political system, a clearer picture of dialectical Islamophobia and its co-dependent relationship between private and state actors emerges.

Despite tensions between the military dictatorship and Buddhist populist groups, both parties shared a common disdain and hatred towards the Rohingya. Under military rule, the government enacted targeted laws, as well as turning a blind eye to hate preaching, anti-Muslim campaigns and religious-based violence incited by Buddhist extremists.[70] In this way, the military government was able to detract from popular discontent and deflate some tensions by finding common ground with these groups.[71] Ultimately, the corruption and mismanagement of the military government precipitated a necessary transition of governance, which brought the NLD to power. The NLD was an elitist party that gained populist appeal through alliances and support from Buddhist nationalist groups and figures. Hence, Islamophobic protest movements in Myanmar helped bring about a democratic political system that was subservient to an ultra-Burman Buddhist nationalist agenda. This government functioned alongside a military faction that had complete control over civilian administration in parts of the country. Ironically, the persecution of Rohingya worsened under democratic rule because the NLD had to pander to both the USDP and the populist Buddhist extremist groups. In this fashion, dialectical Islamophobia in Myanmar was not solely a top-down process, whereby government policies and rhetoric emboldened private actors into action. Rather, elements of the government, namely the USDP, were able to become further aggressive and forceful in their repression of the

Rohingya because their brutality towards the Rohingya aligned with the aims of the Buddhist extremist groups that brought the NLD to power. Their actions were purified through the pretence of operating in the name of a democratically elected regime and not a military dictatorship. As the NLD was a *de facto* mediator between the former military regime and Buddhist extremists, there was pressure to justify the actions of these groups, which ultimately precipitated the genocide.

Sanitising the Rohingya genocide through 'war on terror' logic

Throughout the period of military rule, the state and Buddhist extremist groups perpetuated the national mythology of the Rohingya as foreigners and unwanted 'others', exclusively referring to them as 'Bengalis' to reinforce this claim. The underlying logic of this narrative was to support the baseless fear of the Islamisation of Burma and the urgency of preserving and protecting the purity of national identity along Burman Buddhist lines. Increasingly, in the context of the 'war on terror', resistance to state and public persecution of the Rohingya was linked to the archetype of the dangerous Muslim man. For example, in June 2012 there was a spate of violence that lasted four days in Sittwe and other townships in Rakhine between Burman Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims. In the aftermath of this violence, state officials along with Buddhist extremists spread unsubstantiated claims linking the Rohingya resistance in this conflict to terrorism. The then Director of the President's Office, Hmuu Zaw, circulated rumours that Rohingya terrorists from the RSO, which at this point was a defunct resistance movement, were crossing into Myanmar from other countries with weapons to terrorise Rakhine Buddhists.[72] It is undeniable that Rohingya partook in violence against Burman Buddhists in this four-day conflict. However, in this instance and others, there was an explicit linking of violence committed by Rohingya to the discourse of terrorism and an inability to acknowledge equivalent acts of violence committed by Rakhine Buddhists in a similar fashion. In other words, terrorism was exclusively defined as violence committed by Rohingya, whereas Rakhine Buddhists were 'exalted' above such labels. The lexicon used to describe Rohingya violence fell within a larger narrative concerning Muslims that was operating within the context of the 'war on terror'. As Wade observes:

> [the] persistent framing of the violence as terrorism driven by religious zealotry took on a new force after June 2012 . . . By raising the spectre of terrorism, opponents of the Rohingya could connect the events playing out on home soil to a broader conspiracy . . . one fuelled by images that began to circulate on social media of the September 2001 attacks on New York and the destruction by the Taliban of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan the same year [73]

This 'war on terror' logic also served as a useful tool to sanitise the state's role in the Rohingya genocide.

Aung San Suu Kyi had faced international criticism for her passive stance over the Rohingya genocide. A number of institutions stripped away honorary designations and fellowships bestowed on her, including Amnesty International's highest honour, the Ambassador of Conscience Award. Furthermore, Canadian institutions of higher learning withdrew their honorary PhD designations, and the Canadian government revoked her honorary citizenship.[74] Despite international rebuke, Suu Kyi staunchly defended her nation against claims of genocide. During the early stages of the genocide in September 2017, Suu Kyi and the state evoked 'war on terror' logic, claiming that the violence perpetrated against the Rohingya consisted of military 'clearance operations' to root out terrorists. She maintained these claims despite the emergence of satellite images of entire Rohingya villages being burned and destroyed.[75] In August 2018, when mounting evidence of a genocide at the hands of the Myanmar military began to surface, Suu Kyi doubled down on her earlier allegations, asserting that 'the danger of terrorist activities, which was the initial cause of events leading to the humanitarian crisis in Rakhine remains real and present today'.[76] Suu Kyi's 'war on terror' logic, not only aimed to sanitise and justify the military actions that led to the genocide, but also blamed the victims for the violence. This posturing persisted after formal charges of genocide were brought before the ICJ in November 2019.

Suu Kyi offered voluntary testimony defending her nation at the ICJ tribunals. In her testimony, she framed the August 2017 violence as a reaction to the dangerous Muslim man, describing the genocide as an instance of 'intercommunal violence' where the military was taking actions against 'insurgents or terrorists'.[77] Suu Kyi's statements demonstrated an inability to acknowledge the violence committed at the hands of the Myanmar military and Buddhist extremists as terrorism, even though evidence presented at the tribunal described instances of brutal violence, murder and rape of civilians, as well as the destruction of Rohingya homes and villages.[78] Despite the massive number of Rohingya casualties in the genocide, numbering in the tens of thousands, there was a rehashing of the notion that the Rohingya were connected to a broader narrative of Muslims and terrorism. According to this logic, the Rohingya were not victims but the cause of the violence. As such, violence against the Rohingya was an unfortunate consequence, an inevitable byproduct of their own making. In this way, the destruction of Muslim homes and lives was sanitised by evoking 'war on terror' logic.

The 'war on terror' and Islamophobic pathologies in the global South

The Rohingya genocide was the culmination of years of structural and private Islamophobia in the absence of a unified and coherent resistance. Building on the framework established by Beydoun, this exploration has described dialectical Islamophobia as a co-dependent relationship between structural and private Islamophobia in Myanmar. This symbiotic relationship entailed state targeting of

the Rohingya, which stirred and encouraged private actors into action. However, Buddhist extremist groups also empowered the state in post-democratic Myanmar, which led to mass atrocities. Analysing Islamophobia in Myanmar as a co-dependence of structural and private Islamophobia provides nuanced understandings on how the Rohingya genocide was able to take place in post-democratic Myanmar. To view this conflict from an Islamophobia studies perspective also furnishes original insights into the Rohingya genocide.

Understanding the phenomenon of Islamophobia in Myanmar is of importance, as much of the literature examining Islamophobia is focused primarily on the global North. However, in addition to Myanmar, other nations from the global South have demonstrated similar Islamophobic pathologies. For example, the region referred to as the 'Triple Frontier', the border between Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay, is home to a significant Muslim community of Lebanese immigrants and their descendants. Since the early 2000s and the onset of the 'war on terror', this area has been constructed as a 'terrorist sanctuary' by independent domestic media as well as the state through various governmental agencies in Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil.[79] These unsubstantiated claims by private actors and the state have framed the region as 'lawless' and 'dangerous', reproducing the mythology of the dangerous Muslim man needing to be policed. Furthermore, this stigmatising campaign has been used as a pretext to militarise the region to serve imperial interests, as it is rich in biodiversity and natural resources.[80] Similarly, struggles for self-determination and independence in the Philippines have been obstructed using the 'war on terror' to target Moro Muslims. The Philippine government has repeatedly invoked the global 'war on terror' to target Moro liberation movements, alleging supposed links to Islamic terrorist organisations.[81] The resultant anti-terror policies have been used to violate the civil and political rights of the Moro population through illegal arrests, detention and torture, and demonising the teachings of Islam. Consequently, the Philippines' 'war on terror' has utilised Islamophobia as a political tool for suppressing the struggles of marginalised groups by conflating social justice movements for self-determination with sympathies for and affiliations to terrorism.[82] More extreme forms of structural and private Islamophobia mediated through the 'war on terror' have occurred in India and China.

India has recently passed the Citizen Amendment Act and has proposed an all-India National Registry of Citizens. The Citizen Amendment Act fast-tracks citizenship to non-Muslim asylum seekers in neighbouring Muslim-majority nations. The National Registry of Citizens specifically targets undocumented Muslims, excluding all other religious communities in India. These measures effectively render undocumented Muslim Indians stateless.[83] This law was enacted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindutva nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and demonstrates the virulence of dialectical Islamophobia, as there have been waves of hate crimes and intercommunal violence against Indian Muslims in the aftermath of these laws.[84] In China, structural processes enacted

by the state have been implemented to imprison over a million Uighur Muslims in concentration and labour camps.[85] Reports of the experiences of Uighurs under these state measures describe forced labour, the sterilisation of Uighur women, coercive thought-transformation and brainwashing, the harvesting of organs, rape and various forms of torture.[86] Many of these violations fall within genocide conventions to which China is a signatory.[87] In the cases of India and China, as with Myanmar, the state evokes the 'war on terror'; in part, presenting these state measures as necessary for policing and containing the dangerous Muslim man under the spectre of terrorism.[88]

Islamophobia has become, through the 'war on terror', globalised, demanding further exploration in the growing field of Islamophobia studies. A nuanced understanding of how structural, private and dialectical Islamophobia transcend global North and South barriers in the 'war on terror' can help us to develop a more coherent and nuanced narrative of resistance and activism that can, in turn, challenge the variant forms and manifestations of Islamophobia as they emerge.

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